

Transgression Now

Revolt – its face distorted by amorous ecstasy – tears from God his naive mask, and thus oppression collapses in the crash of time. Catastrophe is that by which a nocturnal horizon is set ablaze – it is time released from all bonds. (Bataille, 1985, p.134)

Transgression... is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation its harrowing and poised singularity. (Foucault, 1998, p.28)

To transgress, according to Michel Foucault's reflections on Georges Bataille and sexuality from his 1963 essay 'A Preface to Transgression,' is to cross a border, a line, a limit, or a boundary. Alternatively, and in a more extended and possibly occult sense, and *pace* some of Foucault's intellectual contemporaries, it is to reconfigure what might otherwise be an *aporia*, whether sensual, erotic, textual, intellectual, emotional, ethical, political, material, metaphysical or aesthetic, and open it up for what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would later describe, in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizo-*

phrenia, as deterritorialization. As is well known, deterritorialization for these thinkers, as both process and emergence, is invariably paired with the notion of reterritorialization, and this is particularly so in what has come to be known after Frederic Jameson as late capitalism and its (possibly) now outdated cultural corollary in postmodernism.

Importantly, the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that the word 'transgression' in this context could be argued as evoking, and whether in critical theory, philosophy, art or popular culture, is not merely about breaking rules or defying conventions as has sometimes and somewhat romantically and reductively been assumed. Such assumptions do, of course, have their reference points and justifications. Some of these reference points are well known: for instance, the broadly Franco-centric and generally male legacy of D.A.F. Sade, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Dada and Surrealism, Antonin Artaud, Bataille, Jean Genet, the Lettrists and Situationists and Foucault himself.¹ Other reference points include the charismatic influence of various distaff Anglophone figures such as Oscar Wilde, Aleister Crowley, Andy Warhol, Kathy Acker and William Burroughs, or the Viennese *actionists*, performance art globally, and the mid twentieth century emergence from African-American music of certain rock and roll stars with all their brazen sonic populism, intricate allusion, multiple epigones and self-consciously decadent analogues in hip hop, electronica, metal, or industrial and gothic music and culture (Blake, 2009, pp.76-90). These are, at least, some of the main coordinates for transgression as concept and performance. However, if transgression is based at least in part upon breaking rules, it is of course necessary for there to be rules to break, boundaries to be crossed, lines to be redrawn, opposing forces or sensations without which it would be meaningless as both act and idea. Transgression does not happen in a void, nor does it emerge *ex nihilo* from some flow of metaphysical desire or quasi-virtuality. In that sense every transgression is also a conflict or agon emerging from a facticity, from a body or bodies, from a space of confinement or containment, as Foucault and before him Bataille were acutely aware. It is a conflict that may, moreover, under the right circumstances, and if pursued in the right spirit, generate a spark of novelty and thus provide a flash of vivid illu-

mination against a canvas of darkness where before there was only a listless grey conformity of action and reaction, of habit, of convention, of dialectic and binarism, of a yes and a no.

In this understanding of transgression as Chris Jenks has so vividly outlined, where there is a clash of two opposed elements or forces, whether contraries or contradictions, there is no longer any moment of sublation, no *aufhebung* as in Hegelian or post-Hegelian thought, no representation as such. Instead, and as a result of a differential between velocities or modes of expression there is an explosion of force itself: a detonating flower of force and multiplicity that opens up its petals and tendrils and blossoms instantly into new networks of communication and expansion, new forms of libidinal economy and encounter, new patterns of semiosis and dissipation. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the image of the lightning flash so often recurs in illustrations of transgression and its variants in both critical thought and popular culture, and is invariably, in the former domain anyway, implicitly attached to related images of disturbances in time and space, in difference and identity, in continuity and discontinuity. The lightning flash is an image, moreover, and importantly, of rupture, penetration, fissure or charge – of a coupling and uncoupling of intensities – rather than as a measure of causality, consistency or linkage *per se*.

Thus, for instance, in Deleuze's seminal pre-Guattari study of difference and repetition from 1968, we encounter the curiously gothic figure of the 'dark precursor' who, like the strange attractors of chaos theory, both presages and configures becomings by reading the trajectory of thought backwards, not merely as inversion or reversal, but as multiplicity. Here, then, we discover in a discussion of the role of difference in repetition for itself that the illumination is about *communication*:

...what is this agent, this force which ensures communication? Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible dark precursor, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated. (Deleuze, 1994, p.119)

As with Bataille (whom Deleuze, interestingly, barely mentions here or elsewhere), the moment of transgression is also the mo-

ment of difference. But where Deleuze will take difference into the realms of virtuality, creation, experimentation and the event as transformation within a univocal realm of multiplicity, for Bataille, difference is bound up with the primal forces of eroticism and death, absolute expenditure and sacrifice, and in this he reveals his debt to Sade as much as to Nietzsche, (the Sade, of course, whose own Justine, notably, meets her death in a lightning strike not once, but twice). Bearing this image of the zig zag flash of transgression in mind (which, in the case of Deleuze and Guattari, might be more accurately rendered as transversality, or as Deleuze puts it in relation to Spinoza, the 'witch's path,' in that transgression *per se* is not central to their project), (Deleuze, 1988, p.1) it might also be fair to claim, as Nick Land has suggested, that the retrospective notion of Bataille as a 'philosopher of transgression' has little or no justification considering the sparse use of the term itself in his work (Land, 1992, p. 63). However, as Benjamin Noys has also argued in response to Land's observation, a strong and reasonable claim can be made, nonetheless, that transgression, whether named or not, is consistently operative as a technique of *opening* throughout Bataille's writings (Noys, 2000, p. 9), whether critical and fictional, and it is in this sense, as well as in its sense of charge or fissure or communication, that the concept of transgression has travelled via figures such Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and others into the broader cultural conversation of late capitalism.

For Bataille, the essence of transgression is that it is in a perpetual conflict with taboo, in that without taboo there *could* be no transgression. There is no pure transgressive force in Bataille: transgression is always in tension with prohibition in one way or another, or as Foucault puts it:

Transgression is an action which involves limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line that it crosses.(Foucault, 1998, p.27)

This spatialized compression of transgression and taboo into a 'harrowing' singularity raises a number of questions about the dura-

tional aspect of this 'flash' that remain as central to the transgressive moment as the deliberate challenge such moments supposedly make to the norms and conventions of the culture in which they are enacted. On this point, some of the examples of transgression that Bataille indicates in his *Eroticism* are not entirely what one might expect in terms of transgressive convention. Transgression here as elsewhere is, of course, intimately related to other Bataillan themes such as laughter, intoxication, cruelty, sacrifice, blood, vomit and other bodily fluids, the sacred, the impossible, anguish and death, but in terms of eroticism itself, we find that, perhaps surprisingly, marital sex is considered as transgressive. The argument here indicates something central to Bataille's notion of transgression, in that for him marriage becomes a site in which the taboo against non-reproductive erotic experience is given a stage, and is in this sense a violation in spite of the formal conventions observed, as human sacrifice or killing an opponent in a war might operate in a society which ostensibly objects to the killing of human beings. (Bataille, 1991, pp 123-128). Thus while on a personal level for Bataille, an erotic act with both its excess of *joiissance* and its undertow of post-coital anguish sensitizes the participants to the fundamental duality between continuity (through reproduction, say) and discontinuity (death or *la petit mort*), what this also signals is the cultural or societal tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity as this related tension plays out not only in rituals of sacrifice and exclusion or expulsion or scapegoating as these specify the limits of the profane and the excess of the sacred, but also in the mechanized and industrial cruelties of, for example, fascism and by extension more contemporary and politically driven atrocity and mass murder. (Bataille, 1983, pp. 137-160). This further indicates Bataille's broader political trajectory, initially built upon by Foucault and subsequently dematerialized by Jacques Derrida, (Derrida, 1978, pp. 251-277), in which a general economy, a solar economy of absolute excess and expenditure and transgression is opposed to the restricted economy of modern capitalism. It is here that Bataille's analysis becomes both contemporary and contentious, for as a number of commentators have noted, the form of late capitalism that characterizes the early twenty first century is very much based on notions of pointless expenditure and excess as it is on reckless accumulation, on extravagant waste as much as on order or regulation, on relentless and

deliberate 'transgressive' hedonism as much as on the sober morality that might once have been associated with the capitalist system. Thus, as Noys has summarised, there are critics such as Joseph Goux who claim that Bataille's analysis and transgressive strategy is no longer applicable, whilst others such as Baudrillard argue that capitalism has effectively become Bataillan in its solar extravagance. (Noys, 2000, p.122).

From this perspective, the transition between an economy based on production as in Fordism or Five Year Plans to one based on consumption has parallels with the idea of a transition between the disciplinary societies anatomized by Foucault and the control society as mapped out so persuasively in relation to Foucault by Deleuze in his seminal essay, "Postscript on Control Societies" from 1990. In this later model, as Mark Fisher has so eloquently elaborated in his polemical study, *Capitalist Realism: Is there an Alternative?* the anti-capitalist movement(s) are always already formulated by a radically de-centred and strategically absent capitalist Other to the extent that the notion of there even being an 'alternative,' a form of transgression that can *actually* transgress, has been turned into a kind of spin on the notion of rebellion and revolution as fashion accessories or as video game distractions rather than acts of ethical or political engagement. Thus Fisher writes of the tragic figure of Kurt Cobain of Nirvana as marking an end point to the possibility of transgression in its more classical sense as follows:

In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché. (Fisher, 2011, p.9)

If Cobain's death marks, as Simon Reynolds and other have suggested, the final moment in which the *zeit* had or could have any kind of *geist*, then it might well be argued that we have reached a stage of post-transgression or transgression fatigue in a culture of

twenty first century exhaustion equivalent to the decadence ushered in by Nietzsche's typically untimely image of the last man. Indeed, such imprisonment and paralysis in the eternal now of late capitalism in which shock has become a deliquescent commodity and the extreme a form of nothing more challenging than entertainment and diversion poses significant challenges to the idea of transgression as it has been historically configured. Accordingly, as the essays in this volume indicate, as much attention needs currently to be given to the *use* of transgression in a variety of contexts, as to its broader significance within a theoretical framework and the contradictions inherent in its evolving legacy. Bearing these complexities as they circle around the notion of transgression and the post-transgressive in mind, it is worth noting briefly some of the characteristics that Bataille in particular associated with transgression as it is discussed in this collection. Centrally for Bataille, the act of transgression implies both a taboo that the subject is aware of and an act that is intentional in some sense. Secondly, the act of transgression opens the subject out to the continuity and discontinuity that become so acute in moments of erotic intensity or extreme violence, and this requires on some level an opening out to death as the determining affect and effect of desire, expression and personal ontology. Thirdly, the act of transgression requires a loss of self and a shattered delirium of personal identity in which a multiplicity of selves can emerge and reconfigure. Fourthly, whilst it is clearly connected with the 'ordinary' sense of transgression, as in the transgression of laws, mores, moral strictures and structures and so forth, the term also connotes an immanence that hints mockingly at the powerlessness of what it positions as a transcendent 'fiction' of authority, whether that transcendent is considered to be masquerading as God, truth or morality – or under late capitalism, aesthetic convention.

Finally, then, and as an instrument of transformation and adaptation, and however playful or nihilistic it's expression, transgression poses an existential challenge to the notion of the human as a bounded, productive, rational and instrumental creature in a homogenous culture, replacing that notion with one of consumption, waste and fundamental dissipation and in doing so, tracing out a line between the human, the inhuman and the spiritual, sexual and material 'catastrophe' of the atheological divine, de-

graded and transfigured, endlessly and immanently, by the ecstasy of annihilation.

Considering this trajectory of the uses (or should one rather speak of the abuses?) of transgression, we can identify a number of clusters. Broadly speaking, there is a tendency to either use transgression in a socio-political context (identifying practices which move beyond the permissible or social norms), locating transgression in cultural practices (the ways we interact with the world) and finally in aesthetic practices (moving beyond the norms and conventions created by the fiction of authority). If we begin with what is maybe the broadest application of transgression as ways of overreaching taboos, we find that **Peter Lemish's** article *The Transgressive Posture* signals precisely this notion of reaching across the acceptable social boundaries of a very sensitive field: the Israel-Arab conflict and argues that only through a transgressive posture, which Lemish develops from Heidegger, can the playing field be levelled.

The same act of reaching across social boundaries is discussed in **Moulay Driss El Maarouf's** article *The Rise of the Underground* where he develops what he refers to as the politics of excrementality; a way to articulate ways of resistance through dirty-mindedness. The music festival, in this case specifically Morocco but conceivably at work everywhere, with its carnivalesque mood becomes a site for vulgar and profane performances not simply from the musicians themselves but from the participants of the festival, which may then engender a community of transgression. The same kind of inclusive understanding is developed in the article *Demokrati som transgression* by **Martin Bak Jørgensen & Óscar García Agustín** who argue from Jacques Rancière's position that democracy is only achievable when those who are usually excluded are included. Focussing specifically on Denmark's immigration policies and how these are challenged by transgressive groups which attempt to resist neo-liberal discursive closure of the public sphere. In the same vein, we find transgression in what is perhaps an unlikely place; the classroom and educational practices. Two articles emphasize the need for transgression in education. The first, **Camille Alexander's** *Teaching Against the Tide* suggests that transgressing a canonical syllabus becomes a way of creating a contact zone between students and professors, thereby increasing students' learning and engagement in classes. Much in the same spirit but with a broader focus

Karen E. Andreasen and Christian Ydesen discuss the history of school education in Denmark in their article *Forsøgs- og udviklingsarbejde i grundskolen som transgressiv praksis*. Here, they show the historical development of transgressive practices in the Danish elementary school, revealing how government control alongside political currents shape these experiments as much as educators themselves. Another historical transgression of a quite different kind is found in **Johan Heinsen's** article *Hvor viljen er lov og fornuften i eksil*, where we see how the retelling of a historical incident – Sir Francis Drake executing Thomas Doughty in 1578 – engages in establishing the boundaries of community and the limits of historiography in connection with the seafaring communities. The marginalized outsider, in this case John Cooke, becomes the means to both challenge and establish these boundaries.

Heinsen's article also allows us to trace a shift; a shift from the more politically oriented readings of transgression (how are boundaries established) to how these boundaries are negotiated in a diversity of cultural practices. One example of this is **Catherine Lord**, who in *Dolphins Who Blow Bubbles* shows how a documentary film may become transgressive in the practices it exposes and the ways the film forces us to engage with both cultural thresholds and animal-human thresholds. In much the same way, **Bent Sørensen's** article *Icons of Transgression* argues that iconic images may transgress normality by challenging stereotypical images of unity and wholesomeness. Through a reading of images of Charles Manson and Patty Hearst, Sørensen shows how viewers may turn from consumers into worshippers. **Jørgen Riber Christensen's** article *Star Wars Kid and the Bedroom Intruder* looks at how people may unexpectedly become icons of the Internet, through a transgression of the private sphere. Surveillance and celebrity is revealed to be bound together with a disciplinary effect, at the same time that these moments may also have a subversive function. Other transgressions on the Internet are discussed by **Jens Kirk** in his article *Transgression and Taboo*, where he argues that fan fiction is a genre which transgresses readers' favourite source texts in order to produce their own fiction, thereby changing readers from consumers to producers. At the same time, certain boundaries of the source texts must also be upheld, so that a fundamental distinction between fan and author may be maintained.

With Kirk's argument, we also see that aesthetic practices become part of the cultural practices where transgression plays a part. One example of this combination of cultural and aesthetic practices is found in lesbian cinema, discussed in **Alla Ivanchikova's** article *Flirting with the Law*, where Ivanchikova investigates notions of law outside the heteronormative, where the viewer is invited to flirt with the law and the law is no longer regarded as heteronormative. A similar interest in the normative, although in a different manner, is broached by **Mikkel Jensen** in his article *En grænse for transgressionen?* in which Jensen looks at different kinds of transgression; social or personal, finding that transgression becomes a way of self-development but also holds the risk of serving as an empty act. A more philosophically-oriented discussion of transgression and the heteronormative comes in **Charlie Blake and Beth Johnson's** article *Does the Porn Star Blush?*, where they discuss ideas of post-transgression in the representation of explicit sexual acts in film, where non-pornographic modes of representation may point towards a search for authenticity in the cinematic image.

We find a different way of using transgression in **Mia Rendix's** article *Transgression as Tragic Typology*, where Rendix argues that American tragedy differs in kind from the European tragedy. American tragedy insists on a dual nature where cosmic harmony may be shattered and recreated through apocalyptic transgressions. A similar focus on the cosmic can be found in **Kim Toft Hansen's** article *Religion in Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, where Hansen argues that crime fiction in Scandinavia is moving towards becoming a post-secular genre, which on the one hand discusses and engages with modernity, yet at the same time opens up for discussion (and critique) of religion and spirituality, thereby transgressing modernity's own ideals. A related concern for ontological divisions are found in **Helle Thorsøe Nielsen's** article *Ontologisk transgression in Adaptation*, where Nielsen outlines a range of different types of transgression, with the intention of uncovering a range of different ways of destabilizing the ontology of a fiction – in this case Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*. Going further than meta-fictional transgression, Nielsen suggests several forms of reflexive transgression.

A similar formalist interest governs **Claus A. Foss Rosenstand's** article *Genre Transgression in Interactive Works*, where Rosenstand ar-

gues for the genre transgression of interactive works as creating what he refers to as the simulative genre, characterized by the transformation of the communicator into a simulator, thus creating a framework for analysing any interactive text. **Helle Kannik Hastrup's** article *Grænseoverskridende multi-protagonistfortællinger* discusses the generic reformations of complex artfilm strategies which migrate into popular film with the coming of the multi-protagonist film, where the traditional narrative structures of Hollywood are altered and remade. **Kathleen Alves'** article *The Transgressive Literacy of the Comic Maidservant in Tobias Smollett's Humphry Clinker* returns us to social tensions by discussing the "servant problem" in Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, where servants are revealed to not exist as external subjects but instead as attendants in the discursive formation of the modern family. **Ida Klitgård's** article *Food For Thought* is a comparative analysis the Danish translations of James Joyce's *Ulysses* particularly as it pertains to the significance of food, enhanced into a discussion of cannibalistic and religious metaphors. Klitgård's analysis shows how cultural cannibalism inevitably becomes part of such a discussion. **Steen Christiansen's** article *Body Refractions* examines Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* and the notions of character identification and bodily transformation, arguing that the digital morphing of *Black Swan* suggests a different relation to the cinematic image, one which can only be understood in terms of affect rather than representation.

As we can see from this broad and diverse range of scholarship, despite a certain degree of transgression fatigue, the term remains critically viable and if nothing else maintains an openness to other alternatives, even as they strain to find their form.

Notes

- 1 One should not, of course, forget the centrality of at least three non-French thinkers eagerly absorbed by the French intellectual modernist tradition – Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Lewis Carroll – to many if not most of the significant currents of transgression in 20th century thought and culture.

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